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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004247

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SUBJECT: PRT ERBIL: MINISTER OF PESHMERGA'S VIEW ON THE PESHMERGA AND BAGHDAD

REF: BAGHDAD 4059

Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) This is a PRT Erbil cable. Omer Othman (known as Za'im Ali), the Kurdistan Regional Government's Minister of Peshmerga (KDP - Kurdistan Democratic Party) met Erbil IPAO to clarify Peshmerga and party views on Kurdish - U.S. relations, the PKK, negotiations with Baghdad, and freedom of the press. This cable addresses Za'im Ali's concerns about KRG Peshmerga and security coordination with Iraq's central government in Baghdad. According to Za'im Ali, the Kurds have three redlines: the peshmerga cannot be disarmed; they must retain the name "peshmerga"; and the KRG parliament must approve any deployment of peshmerga outside the KRG as well as any deployment of Iraqi armed forces in the Kurdistan region.

MNF-I sponsored KRG negotiations with Baghdad

¶2. (C) Za'im Ali participated in the MNF-I sponsored meeting at Khanzad Hotel (Erbil) held to reach agreement on a Memorandum of Understanding allowing transition to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) in the KRG. Referring to Baghdad's view of the KRG, he said there was 'hatred behind the curtain', disguised by such issues as constitutional requirements, definitions, and lines of control. He complained that Baghdad did not give central government representatives authority to formalize agreements and said this was a factor in failure to meet the meeting's goals. (NOTE: KRG representatives, including Za'im Ali, also told MNF-I all agreements had to be submitted to KRG President Massoud Barzani and the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) for approval.)

¶3. (C) Baghdad wants two things, asserted Za'im Ali: to merge Peshmerga fighters into the New Iraqi Army, and to reduce the Peshmerga to nothing more than a police function. He said Baghdad continues to view the Peshmerga as a militia like Muqtada al Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi (JAM), which he said was incorrect because the Peshmerga have an historical role in the Kurdish struggle

against Saddam for their rights. The Peshmerga, he said, have their own command structure and role defending the Kurds, unlike the police, but the central government is unwilling to give them tanks and aircraft because they do not want Peshmerga equipment armed to defend the KRG. In effect, he claimed, Baghdad wants to limit the Peshmerga's role by limiting its equipment.

Peshmerga's role - regional and national

¶4. (C) Za'im Ali accused the central Iraqi government of fearing the Peshmerga as an 'army within an army'. The Peshmerga should have, in his view, tanks and airborne capability as well as artillery. (COMMENT: KRG demand for this offensive capability has fueled Baghdad's fear of establishing the Peshmerga as an independent fighting force. END COMMENT) He pointed out that Peshmerga with tanks and other heavy armor fought alongside the US to defeat Saddam Hussein. As an example, Za'im Ali said, Baghdad is afraid if the Peshmerga have heavy armor, they could attack Kirkuk or Mosul. He said the KRG would not do that, but would take the cities through MNF-I. .

¶5. (C) Za'im Ali described the Peshmerga security structure

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guarding KRG cities, saying a force of 40,000 and coordination of Peshmerga, police, and Asayish, as well as intelligence drawn from the local population, accounted for the relative safety of the north. He pointed out that Arabs cannot live, work, or visit without security and intelligence clearances. (NOTE: This restriction of movement on the basis of religion or ethnicity raises a possible constitutional issue, which could impede further negotiations with central authorities.)

KDP-PUK conflicts and coordination

¶6. (C) Because of intense fighting between PUK and KDP in the 1990s, Za'im Ali said, there are bitter feelings between the KDP and PUK Peshmerga. The rapid pace of structural unification has surprised him, and he said 'positive steps are being taken quickly.' He noted that KRG officials recognize American concerns for full KRG unification. (COMMENT: Peshmerga ministries continue as separate entities, and Za'im Ali strongly criticized remarks made by PUK Peshmerga authorities, stating that they 'do not have the right' to comment on Peshmerga affairs.)
Speckhard